DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 605 CS 203 925

AUTHOR Watson, Jerry J.
TITLE The Less-Than-Perfect Adult Image in Children's Books. Why?
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 10p.; Study prepared at University of Iowa

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Literature; *Adult Characteristics; Annotated Bibliographies; *Characterization; Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Books; Childrens Literature; Elementary Secondary Education; Librarians; Literary Analysis; Literary Criticism; Parents; *Personality Problems; Response Mode; Teachers

ABSTRACT

In recent years, children's trade books have included a growing number of stories that negatively portray the well-known adults in a child's world--parents, teachers, and librarians. This paper examines children's and adults' reactions to such negative characterizations and defends their presence in children's literature. It then lists and annotates eighteen books presenting negative images of parents and seven presenting negative images of teachers. A book that negatively portrays a librarian is discussed, as well as children's reactions to it. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jerry J. Watson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Dr. Jerry J. Watson
Division of Elementary and Early Childhood Education
College of Education
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

ED150605

THE LESS-THAN-PERFECT ADULT IMAGE IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

WHY?

Over the past decade, the publishing of children's trade books has brought out into the open more than a few startling, challenging, and sometimes disconcerting issues for the juvenile reading audience. One of the more controversial topics has been the steadily growing number of stories that portray the well-known adults in a child's world, namely parents, teachers, and librarians, in terms of negative characterization. Parents and professionals alike, are asking, "Why?"; "Is it necessary?"; and "What 'good' will come of it?" Or statements are made such as "Those are sick books!"; "I wouldn't allow my children to read such trash"; and "I believe that children should read about adults only in positive roles to set a good example for children to follow."

I am not suggesting that all parents, teachers, and librarians object to the portrayal of the alcoholic parent or the parent who abuses children; or the insensitive teacher who looks forward to the end of the day and the end of the pay period; or the unprofessional librarian who out of fear refuses to help junior find the answers to questions of sexuality. Many of the adults that I have met and talked with in classes and meetings are quite delighted to have found that the realm of fiction being offered young people presents the roles of adults in various capacities with differing personalities and behaviors. As one parent commented, "Just as they (adults) exist in the real neighborhoods, schools, and libraries of our time."

CS213925

I listen to children's reactions to such literary portrayals of the hot-so-admirable adult' collectively stated in terms of disgust and contempt, but never is there the demand that the book should be thrown into the incinerator. Children find a great release of anxiety and hostility when reading of the adult who batters and berates children emotionally, as well as physically. Juveniles who read the stories generally find the positive conclusion that the fictionalized children in the stories reach a far greater understanding of themselves and other children who have known of such similar incidents in real life. The outcome is usually predictable: in spite of the injustice handed down by adults, children are quite capable of drawing upon their own inner strengths and resources to survive under the most severe conditions. As has been known for a long time, the resiliency of children is remarkable.

The irate adult, however, stalking the juvenile literary domain under the pretense of protecting and preserving the innocence of childhood, would certainly be willing to throw such contemporary fiction into the incinerator. These adults are not really protecting the innocence of childhood as much as they are trying desperately to preserve and protect the sanctity and reverence of adulthood. We, as adults,cry out, "Don't give us a bad name" or "Don't put us in a bad light" especially in the eyes of children. Our culture demands that children respect and admire adults as if so many chronological years produces an all-knowing and all-loving person providing children with an all-consuming abundance of knowledge and compassion -- much as the proverbial Santa Claus image.

But children soon learn that Santa Claus does not really exist, and when the belief was such, he remembers, "Well, he only came once a year anyway." Contemporary fiction written for children no longer portrays the ideal adult, because children know at an early age such perfectionism does not exist in their real world. Stories today provide the juvenile reading audience with accurate delineations of non-saccarine coated characters. Some certainly disgusting and contemptible, but real and believable.

The following stories are categorized according to the not-so-perfect adult images of parents, teachers, and librarians that are contained in stories for children.

The adults depicted in the following stories are minor characters to the protagonists' child main character who always carries the major roles and often suffers the major consequences inflicted by self-centered and cruel adults.

Negative Image of Parents

Blume, Judy. It's Not the End of the World. New York: Bradbury, 1972. Mother and father preparing for a divorce have uncontrollable fights and cause children to worry excessively.

_____. And Then Again, Maybe I Won't. New York: Bradbury, 1973. Newly-rich parents drop family customs and principles which confuses their son.

Cleaver, Vera, and Bill Cleaver. The Mimosa Tree. Philadelphia, 1970. The mother deserts her children and blind husband in the city slums.

Donovan, John. I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip. New York: Harper and Row, 1969. The divorced mother is an alcoholic who unjustly accuses her lonely son of being a homosexual.

Negative Image of Parents (continued)

Donovan, John. Remove Protective Coating a Little at a Time. Harper and Row, 1973. Both parents ignore their son by treating him as a high school chum and not as a real son.

Fenton, Edward. Duffy's Rocks. New York: Dutton, 1974. The frustrating search by a young boy for his father who deserted the family.

Guy, Rosa. The Friends. New York: Bantam, 1973. Father's prejudiced viewpoint refuses to allow his daughter to associate with her best friend.

Holland, Isabelle. Heads You Win, Tails I Lose. Philadelphia, 1973. Embittered parents fight, separate, and depressed mother gets drunk every day.

Hunt, Irene. The Lottery Rose. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976. An indigent mother allows her lover to beat her son so that she can have her rent paid.

Kerr, M. E. Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. The parents are so involved with solving drug addiction that they ignore the needs of their daughter.

Mathis, Sharon Bell. Sidewalk Story. New York: Viking, 1971. Mother refuses to give daughter aid in helping neighbors from being ousted from their apartment.

_____. Teacup Full of Roses. New York: Viking, 1972. Mother has an all-consuming interest in her drug-addicted son to the exclusion and neglect of other family members.

_____. Listen for the Fig Tree. New York: 1974. Tormented mother drinks heavily because of the murder of her husband.

Neufeld, John. Edgar Allan. New York: S. G. Phillips, 1968. Parents return their adopted black child because of community outrage.

Norris, Gunilla. Take My Waking Slow. New York: Atheneum, 1970. An alcoholic father doles out some harsh and unbelievably cruel punishment to his son.

Peck, Robert Newton. Millie's Boy. New York: Knopf, 1973. Millie is a prostitute killed by an irate lover which leaves her son on his own.

Platt, Kin. Hey Dummy! New York: Dell, 1971. Parents of normal boy ridicule him and forbid him to make friends with a brain-damaged friend.

_____. The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear. Radnor, Pa.: Chilton, 1968. Divorced parents do not love nor want their son who suffers from a speech impediment.

Negative Image of Teachers

Coles, Robert. Saving Face. New York: Dell, 1972. An insensitive teacher loses control when a black student has not done his homework.

Cone, Molly. Number Four. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972. Indian students are constantly humiliated by covert and overt acts on the part of teachers, administrators, and white students.

Cullum, Albert. The Geranium on the Window Sill Just Died, But Teacher You Went Right On. New York: Delacorte/Harlan Quist, 1971. An anthology of short poems describing teachers and principals who do not share the same perception as do children regarding the place and nature of children within the classroom.

Evans, Mari. J D. New York: Doubleday, 1973. In one of the short stories, Miss Ackerman makes J D feel foolish because he can't bring the milk money.

Greenfield, Eloise. Sister. New York: Crowell, 1974. A substitute teacher, Mrs. Garner, ridicules children to the point of explosion, and then threatens expulsion when demands of respect are not met.

Negative Image of Teachers (continued)

Hentoff, Nat. In the Country of Ourselves. New York: 1971. An authoritarian principal almost precipitates a student revolution.

Viorst, Judith. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. New York: Atheneum, 1974. The teacher does not like Alexander's invisible picture of the castle, nor his forgetting the number sixteen.

Negative Image of Librarians

Perhaps it is because of the lack of involvement of children with librarians, or maybe writers don't find librarians make particularly interesting characters; or just maybe most of them do a pretty good job at their jobs of recommending and finding books that children can use and enjoy that there are not many books at all in existence that portray librarians in less-than-perfect roles. I would like to suggest one title: Freddy's Book written by John Neufeld and published by Random House in 1973. The book's message to the librarian is that there is a responsibility to any patron, even a kid who should come in asking questions about sexual reference books. Librarians should provide the information and not feel guilty or that they must obtain the parents' permission before such information can be disbursed. Freddy is in search of an answer to

Negative Image of Librarians (continued)

the meaning of that ubiquitous four-letter word written on toilet walls. That's where he found it. Nobody can provide Freddy with a satisfying explanation. Not his friend, his sister, or his Mother, but he has faith in the local librarian who has helped him before. He goes to the library, but the regular friendly librarian is away and he confronts a nervous and embarrassed librarian who refuses to provide Freddy with the information until his parents have consented. Once again, the boy is frustrated in his attempts to fulfill his quest of knowledge. Some experts have suggested that the book is written for adults. (Charlotte Huck. Children's Literature in the Elementary School. Third Edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1976. p. 417.) Truly, the message booms loud and clear that such questions asked by children should no longer be refrained from discussion. It should also be written about in a juvenile book if it has pertinence to the story line. In Freddy's Book that is the story line, although a thin story line.

A talented and open-minded public children's librarian in the mid-west recently asked two brothers, (Bob) age nine and (Jim) age eleven, to read Freddy's Book and to respond to some questions that she had prepared for them. Here are some of the questions and responses:

1. Did you know the meaning of Freddy's four-letter word before you read the book? Bob: "Yes, I knew it 'cause we had sex education at school and Mrs. _____ told us."

Negative Image of Librarians (continued)

2. How old do you think Freddy is? Jim: "My brother is insistent that he is older, but I think Freddy is about seven or eight years old."

3. Did this book explain anything you didn't understand before? What? Bob: "Yes, I found out some new words that Mrs. _____ never told us what they meant . . . vagina and clitoris."

4. Would you recommend this book? Jim: "I recommend strongly -- this book opens up some very good questions on the subject and different opinions of different people."

Freddy's Book, therefore, must have some worthwhile value for young readers if it has satisfied Bob and Jim to the point that they would recommend others to read it. Which in itself can mean a tremendous boost for any children's book.

The growing evidence of the less-than-perfect adult as a form of characterization proves that the realism often found in literature for children contains the elements of the real world and all it's ramifications. No longer does the reader find the wicked stepmother and the cruel and powerful men left to the provinces of fairy tales and folk literature. The contemporary scene of realistic fictional stories for the young draws upon real people found in all corners of life, whether they be admirable or less-than-admirable. Children know this to be true in real life, and real-to-life characters must inhabit the stories if they

Negative Image of Librarians (continued)

are to be plausible for children to know and to prepare for adulthood themselves. The examples of cruel and insensitive and authoritarian adults read about in the stories of the bibliography will not serve as worthwhile models for children to emulate, but to avoid.